

21st Century Challenges in Higher Education: Strategic Changes and Unintended Consequences

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In part, because many planned organizational improvements fall short of their intended goals, higher education administrators have not been able to promote sustained improvements. Most university leaders have been promoted into leadership roles without experience and training to enable them to foresee and address unintended outcomes of their decision making; often, the culture in higher education institutions promotes continuation of the status quo. However, in times of crisis, such as those related to reductions in budgets, many unintended consequences develop as leaders attempt to address change. Unintended consequences have implications related to the success or failure of planned change and higher education administrators must address such outcomes appropriately. This article discusses issues related to unintended consequences of policy changes in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

The changing expectations of stakeholders in higher education and approaches to funding and financial management of universities have necessitated development and implementation of numerous new policies. Universities are taking various steps to address reduction in state and federal funding. For example, because of a possible future federal requirement, universities will implement policies that graduate students will no longer be eligible for subsidized Stafford loans; that is, these students will be required to begin to pay interest on student school loans immediately. Currently, interest on loans is deferred through federal programs until six months after graduation. Many California universities are implementing policies that will cap enrollment at public institutions. Because of changes in funding formulas, some institutions are considering discontinuation of developmental coursework that enable low achieving students to access higher education. Still others are considering differentiated tuition based upon cost and demand. Such policies represent attempts to address immediate needs, but fail to address root causes and systemic issues. The intent of this article is not to

debate the worth of various policies, but to discuss unintended outcomes related to such policy implementation. This discussion will focus on unintended or unpredicted consequences that are correlates of various policies implemented within higher education. Thornton, Beattie, and Brackett (2010) explained:

Unintended consequences, historically studied in business and organizational theory also apply in educational contexts. Policies and procedures are commonly implemented to produce a desired outcome; however, employees “game the system” to exploit the rules to produce an entirely different result. Unintended consequences may be foreseeable or unforeseeable. Likewise, unintended consequences may be positive or negative and examples are numerous. Prohibition promoted the interest of organized crime. Price controls lead to shortages. Government support of bio-fuels may have led to increased prices for food. (p. 2)

POTENTIAL IMPACTS

Often, when an organization implements a policy that is linked to high-stakes outcomes, the stakeholders will “game the system.” Unfortunately within organizations, “People are unaware of the occurrence of unintended consequences, and these then come back into social reality as unacknowledged conditions or, even, again as unintended consequences of future actions” (Baert, 1991, p. 209). An example would be the case of the Education Testing Service SAT cheating scam. Universities set up high stakes outcomes; such that test scores dictate a major component of acceptance of students. As a result, high school students paid up to \$2,500 for a university sophomore to take the SAT for them (New York Post, 2012). Policy implementation can generate systemic unintended consequences that negatively influence the underlying programs. For instance, when university administrators implement differential tuition based on the cost of instructional programs, low-income students might be adversely affected. The mission of a university might be to provide increased access for underrepresented students; however, due to budget concerns, the implementation of a differential tuition policy would increase the cost of selected courses (e.g. engineering and lab classes). An unintended consequence of such a policy would decrease access for low-income students who could not afford to enroll in higher cost courses.

In efforts to promote accountability, some state legislators have discussed changing the funding metric for universities from full time equivalent students (FTE) to student completion rates. Such a policy could create grade inflation, as professors would be under some pressure to move marginally achieving students from an F to a D. Those students who received a D in a class instead of an F would be counted as a “completer;” thus, the university would receive funding for the student. The potential consequences include implications related to grade point average, mastery of required skills and knowledge, and financial aid.

In addition, such policy changes promote discussions related to the definition of completion and related manipulation of the system. Many questions develop. What is the definition of completion? Does the definition of completion relate to a course, a degree, or a certification? Will universities receive funding for students who drop a course? Although intent of such a policy is to promote accountability, unintended consequences include gaming of the system and financial barriers for students.

Some unintended consequences can promote organizational improvement. Morell (2007) explained, “unforeseen refers to situations where applicable analytical frameworks and experience were not considered when projecting what might happen when a program is implemented” (p. 446). Budget reductions can become a tool to facilitate organizational change. Consider a program with extremely low student enrollment staffed with tenured professor(s) who have political connections; university administrators could use budget reductions to close or reorganize such an inefficient program without negative political consequences. Alternatively, budget reductions could be used to reorganize a standalone student writing center into the English department in an effort to promote accountability. Many programs have developed significant political connections, which would make change difficult or impossible without a budgetary crisis.

From empirical studies, Harris and Ogbonna (2002) developed eight distinct categories of unexpected consequences associated with planned change of corporate culture:

- ritualization of change
- hijacked processes
- cultural erosion
- cultural reinvention
- ivory tower change
- inattention to symbolism
- uncoordinated efforts
- behavioral compliance

Each group of unintended consequences will be discussed in the following sections as they relate to higher education

Ritualization of Change

Many university leaders recognize the importance of organizational culture and develop interventions to improve the culture within their organization. Allaire and Firsirotu (1984) stated, “Indeed, the proposition that organizations have cultural properties, that they breed meanings, values and beliefs, that they nurture legends, myths and stories, and are festooned with rites, rituals and ceremonies has been gaining rapidly in popularity” (p. 194). Schein (2010) discussed the importance of rituals to promote change within organizational culture.

Many policies that require specific practices appear to create intended change but often, they do not produce real or lasting change. Indeed, such policies can promote culture change; however, they can result in a ritualization of the process. For example, the annual evaluations of professors generally address research, teaching, and service. Typically, a large component of these evaluations is self-reported data that is presented in a prescribed electronic format. As a result, a ritual develops, in which the quality of the paperwork becomes the criterion for the evaluations. However, because the paperwork is self-reported, the resulting evaluation often fails to address areas of weakness. In addition, professors are not observed during actual instructional time. The primary tool for evaluation of the teaching component is end of semester student feedback, which often measures only superficial characteristics and is not based on a well-defined set of outcomes. As a result, student feedback can become a reflection of the professor’s popularity and/or ease of grading.

Thornton et al. (2010) explained that because universities consider student feedback the key component of instructor's evaluation, "in the most extreme cases, professors bribe students; for example, one professor had pizza delivered to class, before evaluations were collected" (p. 2). Professors teach the same classes, semester after semester, and use the same materials. As a result, most institutional ratings of teaching are good to excellent; however, such indicators fail to provide meaningful assessments of the quality of instruction or student outcomes.

Hijacking the Change Process

Change processes designed to promote program improvements are often subject to artful hijackers. Tenured professors are quite adept at redirecting planned changes in order to gain personal benefit. For example, efforts to align curriculum and teaching with student demands, future employment, and other stakeholder needs can be redirected; instead of creating classes to meet such needs, professors can use the planned change for personal benefit. For illustration, a policy implemented with the intention of increasing the number of full-time-equivalent students per professor per year could shift requirements from a two-two teaching load to a two-three load. However, such a policy might not reduce the professor's requirements for service and research; therefore, professors could attempt to justify keeping the same teaching load. Alternatively, a professor might strive to teach the same two-two load previously taught and add a low-enrollment specialty class of interest to the professor that would not necessarily meet the needs of the students and stakeholders. Or, professors could readily agree to teach additional sections of scheduled courses. In such examples, the total FTE could remain relatively constant.

With the expectation that student outcomes must increase, administrators could develop a culture of data-based decision-making. Such a shift in culture would require the development of a new set of skills and knowledge for both university administrators and faculty. This approach would command the effective use of valid and reliable data to inform major decisions. For example, departments could create linkages between evaluations of teaching and student outcomes. However, the analyst might hijack the process by using the data and knowledge to justify reducing or reorganizing specific departments through the auspices of budget cuts. Therefore, the intended cultural change of improving teaching effectiveness and student outcomes might result in higher teaching loads and classroom sizes and, as such, create a situation detrimental to effective teaching and learning.

Cultural Erosion

Specific actions of leaders or actual events within the university can erode efforts to maintain or promote a positive culture. For example, when a new dean is appointed, the faculty members within the college usually have a sense of intense involvement, enthusiasm, and general support. A typical approach is to appoint a series of committees with a variety of charges aligned with the goals of the new dean. Faculty have the opportunity for involvement; however, such efforts are often not rewarded because actual faculty evaluations are based on the traditional three factors of teaching, publications, and service, with service being the least important. Eventually, enthusiasm fades, support decreases, and the desired new culture erodes. Under such circumstances, Harris and Ogbonna (2002) suggested that

cultural erosion appears linked to lack of reinforcement of desired changes, non-alignment of behaviors, and amplification of inappropriate values.

For example, if the desired change is to promote economic and racial diversity but tuition rates increase, the unintended consequence may actually be decreased diversity. Or, university leaders could desire to increase funded grants and spend significant time discussing the value of grants; however, they fail to provide technical support and do not align the reward system to the stated goal of increased grants. Although initially the leadership behaviors appear to support grant writing, the absence of incentives and technical support actually erodes efforts to establish a grant writing culture.

A College of Education that we studied appointed a new administrative team, which implemented significant changes to the annual evaluation procedures that required vast amounts of documentation. Historically, evaluations had been connected to merit pay increases; however, concurrent with the implementation of new evaluation procedures, the university suspended merit pay. Although, the administration could not provide rewards to reinforce the desired behaviors, faculty was required to provide extensive additional documentation. Some faculty members viewed the new procedures as unnecessary paper work, which had negative impacts on faculty perceptions resulting in an erosion of organizational culture. In this example, as Harris and Ogbonna pointed out, the erosion of organizational culture can be associated with the failure to reinforce desired behaviors.

Cultural Reinvention

University leaders can attempt to promote change through the development of a new organizational culture. Harris and Ogbonna (2002) indicated an unintended consequence of cultural reinvention is the development of a culture that masks the existing culture instead of creating real and lasting change. Schein (2010) discussed the connection between organizational culture and productivity; within the university, this tends to be linked to funded research, nationally recognized research, and, to a lesser extent, student learning and meaningful contribution to the community. For example, a new university leader could encourage an organizational cultural change that promoted retention of students and increased diversity.

However, in many cases, planned organizational changes fail to address the root causes because implemented programs address the symptoms, not the underlying causes. As a result, the changes can affect the surface culture, but true culture remains the same—the “new” culture is only a camouflaged phenotype of the old culture. (Thornton, et al. 2010, p. 5)

The values of the organization have not changed—the old culture is reinforced and the new desired culture fades away.

An illustration of this unintended consequence is attempts by university leaders to increase student diversity on campus without providing appropriate resources. Leaders take the politically correct position. Speeches reflect the merit, the benefits to community and society, and the related moral imperatives. Leadership might discuss the importance of a diverse student body, but fail to develop the appropriate skills among faculty to recruit and retain diverse students.

Increasing the diversity of the student population is difficult especially if deans and department heads lack knowledge, skills, and appropriate resources, or of equal importance, the motivation to implement structural change. Because professors are not forced into retirement, the number of “old guard” professors over the age of 60 has nearly doubled over the last 10 years (June, May 18, 2012). Retention of diverse students may not have been emphasized during their careers. Even when a leader has the knowledge, skills, and experience related to effective programs for diverse students, they may fail to create system-wide engagement and, resultantly, fail to create lasting change.

Another example of an attempt to promote change is the establishment of a data-based decision-making culture; data-based decision making is a high-leverage activity if properly implemented. Data-based decision-making could be used to promote improvements of both teaching and learning. However, if leaders are not proficient in the use of data, interpreting results, and monitoring progress or lack thereof, teaching and learning will not improve. Indeed, on the surface it can appear that a data-based culture has developed without meaningful changes in the classroom environment. Change efforts can fail when leaders are proficient in and dedicated to the planned intervention; however, if they are not proficient, failure is eminent.

Ivory Tower Change

Within the university environment, top-down policies characterize ivory tower change; often, such policies are veiled thinly behind committee recommendations. Deans and department heads are tenured faculty members, but most lack training in organizational theory and leadership. Commonly, they implement new policies or procedures designed to address specific symptoms. Such policies could relate to hiring practices, consolidation of authority, or program entrance requirements. For example a recently minted associate dean implemented a new procedure that required all paperwork to be processed through her office; it reflected a command and control philosophy. The stated reasons related to quality control, equal treatment for all, and the need to meet university requirements. Consequently, a backlog of paperwork developed, timelines were missed, and customer service (particularly, service to students) eroded. Faculty members complained and the leadership responded with a timeline and procedures for processing paperwork, even more cumbersome than the original model. The process continued and solutions created a situation worse than the initial problem itself—resembling “aegrescit medendo” (the remedy is worse than the disease).

Several unintended consequences can develop in relationship to top-down policies. Faculty can come to believe that the leadership does not understand the needs of faculty, that the paperwork is more important than students, or that new rules are designed to control faculty. A similar pattern can develop if the leadership determines that graduate assistants are to be hired through a college level process instead of a program level process. Many graduate students continue to apply for positions until they secure a position. If approval to hire is delayed by policies and procedures, a form of Ivory Tower Change, others will hire many of the highly qualified graduate students, thus reducing the pool of candidates. The unintended consequence is the brightest and best graduate students will tend to migrate to the most responsive colleges or most timely funding.

As another illustration, high-level administrators might implement a policy requiring across the board furloughs during a budget crisis. To create equity, all similar personnel will

have uniform furloughs, regardless of their funding source. An unintended consequence might be that departments on grant funding could be required to return monies that had been budgeted for personnel. In essence, because grant funded employees cannot receive salaries while on mandated furloughs, funds might revert to the grantor. In addition, this situation could result in furloughed personnel seeking employment elsewhere or grantors choosing other grantees.

Inattention to Symbolism

The sixth group of unintended consequences identified by Harris and Ogbonna (2002) was characterized by the failure of leadership to attend to symbolism within the organization. Many researchers have noted the importance of symbols in relationship to organizational culture. Hofstede (1998) stated, “Culture is a characteristic of the organization, not of individuals, but is manifested in and measured from the verbal and/or nonverbal behavior of individuals – aggregated to the level of their organizational unit” (p. 470). According to Schwahn and Spady (1998), organizations have culture, which “take root, grow, evolve, and silently control the attitudes and behaviors of members even if no one is paying attention” (p. 67). Significant indicators of the culture of an organization include symbols, rituals, routines, stories, and myths (Deal & Peterson, 1999). These indicators reflect the norms, beliefs, and values of the organization; furthermore, they reinforce an anticipated or desirable shift in organizational culture. At a basic level, if the university leadership fails to address organizational symbols and rituals, effective shifts in culture are difficult.

Harris and Ogbonna (2002) found that, “inattention to the symbolic dimensions of culture change resulted in a series of unintended impacts, which significantly undermined culture change efforts” (p. 43). A small College of Education (faculty less than 50) that we studied, was restructured from four departments into a single unit. Administrative responsibilities, clerical support, hiring graduate students, control of doctoral programs, and authority were shifted from department chairs to an associate dean. The associate dean lacked an understanding of the significance of the departmental culture and the importance of symbols, rituals, and beliefs associated with departments. As a result, current and potential future students expressed concerns about the future of the college, the department, and the value of their graduate degrees.

Uncoordinated Efforts

Unintended consequences can occur when planned cultural change is misaligned with existing policy or the development of new policy. A ubiquitous illustration of uncoordinated efforts occurs when a dean or department head implements a directive without appropriate support or involvement of faculty. Given increased expectations and restricted funding, upper level administrators of universities are under significant pressures. As a result, they might implement changes without meaningful input from faculty, which can be a source of frustration and lead to obstruction.

Baum (2007) pointed out that state allocations have shifted towards merit-based grant aid, which can be problematic “because of the eligibility criteria, middle- and upper-income students are more likely than lower-income students to receive these grants” (p. 17). Hauptman (2007) argued that one reason for this is “merit based admissions policies tend to

favor better-prepared students, who come most frequently from better and more affluent high schools” (p. 6). As a result, middle and upper income students gravitate to universities with relatively low tuition costs and merit based support to maximize benefits (Hauptman, 2007). Thus, such practices would not align with efforts to support the neediest students.

Many top-down directives receive little to no attention because the resources are unavailable, responsibilities are unclear, and accountability structures are lacking. Often, when two initiatives compete for limited resources, both are unsuccessful and they unintentionally discount each other due to the uncoordinated actions (Thornton et al., 2010). Planning, resource allocations, and data-based decision making could identify many potential negative unintended consequences; as such, leaders could develop an application base for planned change. Lacking these supporting structures, middle managers will make decisions based on personal values, experiences, and beliefs, which are often misaligned with the university vision and mission. Morrell (2007) stated that, “[u]nforeseen consequences emerge from weak application of analytical frameworks and from failure to capture the experience of past research” (p. 445).

Behavioral Compliance

Surface compliance or minimal responses are common outcomes of interventions. Harris and Ogbonna (2002) discussed the paradigm involving the conflict between planned organizational change and behavioral compliance—many planned cultural interventions fail to influence the behaviors of people within the organization. In the study, they found that the values, beliefs, and opinions of the employees—the organizational culture—had not changed. They provided illustrations of changes in overt behaviors connected to interventions; however, the organizational culture resisted true change.

The organizational cultures within departments or colleges often promote silo effects with self-serving agendas. Tenured track faculty function, for the most part, as independent contractors—they meet established university norms and expect to work independently. Professors have little if any contact with high-level administrators. As such, if upper-level administrators design a culture intervention, middle managers are responsible for implementation. Often, interventions are connected to metrics that assess symptoms, but they do not measure root causes of problems.

For example, we studied a college within a university with a newly appointed leadership team consisting of a dean and two associate deans. A series of new procedures were implemented and several committees were appointed. New administrators implemented a system that required detailed logs of copies made by graduate assistants and limited printing for faculty. In response, some faculty and graduate students used a printer that did not have a copy code control. On the surface, it appeared the desired change occurred, but in reality, the same amount of (or more) paper and ink were utilized, but not tracked. Another unintended consequence of limiting professors’ copies was that some professors stopped providing copies of materials for their students and utilized their standard allotment for copies for research related activities. Many professors provided electronic copies and students used machines at places of employment to make copies.

At the same time graduate students were required to submit monthly time sheets to detail hours worked. Many gamed the system; graduate students filled out one sheet, made enough photocopies for the entire year, and on a monthly basis produced the same timesheet.

Essentially, graduate students complied behaviorally with the new policy, but no real change occurred because of the policy.

DISCUSSION

The general public, members of congress and state level leaders have directly, and indirectly, attacked PK-20 education. University leaders must either implement interventions or retreat to their tenure positions as professors. Many extremely well meaning university leaders have worked to foster new cultures that are supportive of the needs of the 21st century. However, the requirements for effective university leadership greatly exceed the demands of the past. On one hand, leaders must design and implement interventions; while on the other, they must be capable of identifying unintended outcomes. Facilitating positive changes to organizational culture is challenging, requires time, and necessitates systems thinking (Senge, 2006). This is especially true, with respect to the culture of universities, as the challenges are magnified by characteristics of universities (e.g. tenure, bureaucratic structures, and existing cultures). At a basic level, unintended outcomes are common because leaders fail to anticipate, plan, and adjust to systemic factors. Morell (2005) identified several reasons that unintended consequences occur:

- Multiple interacting processes or programs are at work in schools
- Functions in social organizations are nonlinear
- Feedback loops take longer than expected
- Planned outcomes are often dependent on initial conditions
- Leaders cannot define all relevant conditions
- Programs and staff adapt to environmental conditions
- Decisions are made on incomplete information
- Leaders fail to detect early relevant changes

University leadership is significantly different from the role of a university professor. Effective university leaders must plan appropriate cultural interventions; at the same time, they must cleverly address unintended consequences. Regrettably in many cases, by the time symptoms related to unintended consequences become apparent, significant resources, including time, funding, and personnel, have been committed. It is not possible to avoid all unintended consequences, but leaders must plan for foreseeable consequences.

Although unintended consequences are impossible to avoid in their entirety, they “are not by definition unknown to the actor who initiated the action” (Baert, 1991, p. 201). Current and future university leaders need to address the unintended outcomes associated with the expectations of stakeholders and future demands associated with the 21st century. Common leadership styles, existing information systems, and traditional approaches may be insufficient to address unintended outcomes. “The observation and capture of potential negative impacts requires the development of analytical frameworks with requisite subject specificity” (Thornton et al., 2010, p. 9); university leaders must evaluate both intended and unintended outcomes.

Both foreseeable and unforeseeable consequences develop in all organizations. Seasoned university leaders have experienced many common unintended consequences; however, learning by experience alone is not acceptable. To the fullest extent possible,

university leaders should prepare to address unintended consequences; moreover, they should anticipate such events and plan accordingly. The skills and knowledge necessary for effective change are more important today than ever. Finally, because university leaders must promote continuous improvement, they must be able to plan for unforeseen outcomes; otherwise, many outcomes will appear to be random, root causes will not be addressed, and effective change will not occur.

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